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ABSTRACT

Thomas Jefferson's elevation of the small landowning farmer to the guardian and bastion of democracy became the centerpiece for a later generation's struggle. Jeffersonian democracy, a philosophy based on the belief that "those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God" guided the rural insurgents that swept Minnesota and North Dakota in the early 20th century. The language of battle permeated all rural movement literature depicting the farmer as the basis of wealth, while being victimized by an unjust economic system that allowed others to appropriate what rightfully belonged to the farmers. This picture pitted those who were honest and open against those who were nefarious, underhanded, and dishonest. To this patriotic image, men added allusions to heroes such as Paul Revere. The battle between the image of the heroic farmer and exploitative capitalist was cast in Jeffersonian language filled with heroic imagery. Rural movements challenged rural people to recognize themselves as liberators. Words and symbols proclaimed the continuity of Jeffersonian Democracy in early 20th century agrarian movements in Minnesota and North Dakota. The effort to meld farmers into a powerful political weapon called upon many of the symbolic and philosophical images popularized a century earlier by Jeffersonian democracy. (SM)

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"THINGS AS THEY SHOULD BE": JEFFERSONIAN IDEALISM AND RURAL REBELLION IN MINNESOTA AND NORTH DAKOTA, 1910 - 1920

by

Larry Remele

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"Things As They Should Be":

Jeffersonian Idealism and Rural Rebellion in Minnesota and North Dakota, 1916-1920

by Larry Remele

Jeffersonian Democracy, a philosophy based on the belief that "Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God," guided the rural insurgencies that swept Minnesota and North Dakota in the early 20th Century.[1] Though the ideas had been modified in the century since Thomas Jefferson first enunciated them, the conception that the farmer was the basis of all wealth and the bastion of democratic ideals remained vital tools for agitation and propaganda. Those ideas were used with great effectiveness by the American Society of Equity and the Nonpartisan League to unite rural people and challenge an established economic and political hierarchy.

The foundation of Jeffersonian Democracy was his belief that the farmer represented the basis of democratic society. Jefferson wrote that independent, self-sufficient, tolerant, and educated landholders provided the best protection for liberty and had "substantial and genuine virtue...." Accordingly, he wanted government to extend and enhance rural power, calling for geographical expansion to provide land for small farms, free trade to allow international exchange of agricultural produce for overseas manufactures, and limited government to minimize regulation and tyranny. In particular, Jefferson excoriated urbanization, likening the "mobs of great cities" to "sores" on the human body and fearing the concentration of capital.

Jefferson's agrarianism enjoyed wide acceptance. However, the United States changed greatly in the 19th Century. Power gravitated from the farms and rural areas to the major manufacturing centers, headquarters for great

banking and industrial networks Though the majority of the population still lived on small farms, they lost political and economic influence. Many came to believe that government no longer served their needs and thought themselves deceived, robbed, manipulated, ridiculed and scorned. In response, rural movements emerged; they called on farm people to reclaim their rightful place of honor within American society. Foremost among them were the Farmers Alliance and Populist Party of the 1890's and its 20th Century successors, the American Society of Equity and the Nonpartisan League.

Behind these movements stood the Jeffersonian ideal. Each, however, confronted a problem of making philosophy and reality conjoin and for the Equity and the NPL the answer was organization. Those movements adapted Jeffersonian philosophy, accepting its ideas about the purity and goodness of rural people, but using them to motivate farm people to seize power at the ballot box. No longer was it sufficient for farmers to act independently; indeed, if rural independence was to survive, farmers had to band together and use government to fight the usurpers who had gained unseeming control. The result was a contradiction--the ideas of Jefferson came to serve an end that he had feared, big government and concentrated political power.

To both Equity and NPL, Jefferson's ideas provided the basis for agitation. Rural people, said the philosophers of the Equity and the NPL, were producers of wealth, not mere manipulators who transferred paper and extracted a tremendous toll for dubious services. As such, rural people manifested the purest expression of democracy; they readily made compacts and worked together for the common good, asked nothing from government except justice, and asserted the simple values of honesty and industry on which the nation had been founded. To agrarian philosophers, the farmer was the guardian of liberty, the rock on which the republic stood. He, however, had

(5) lost his rightful place in America and become a downtrodden and unappreciated toiler whose plain and virtuous existence was the subject of scorn by those whose very wealth depended on rural produce, labor, and industry. Therefore, the farmer had to organize in self-defense of himself, his family, and especially his nation. Only when they did would America once again accord rural people the respect they deserved and the political power that their sheer numbers demanded.

To make those points, both the Equity Society and the NPL developed a wonderful literature, art, and music of agitation, all of it directly heir to Jeffersonian idealism and all of it effective in uniting rural people in ways that changed politics forever in the Upper Midwest.

The rock on which this rural agitation stood was clear delineation between the "good" farmer and the "bad" usurpers. Building on a solid and still vital legacy left by the Farmers Alliance and the Populist Party of the 1890's, both the Equity Society and the NPL extolled the farmer while excoriating those who came to be known as the "interests," or "Big Biz." In 1914, for example, speakers at an Equity Society meeting in Fargo said that the "farmers of the northwest have furnished the capital for others to do business on...have toiled early and late; have seen vast fortunes grow and magnificent palaces erected on the money which should never have left their hands, most of it needless, most of it pure robbery...." That robbery, continued the speaker, allowed "men who have been shrewd and concienceless enough keep up the game of extracting the money from the farmer and producer" to send their families to Europe, the seaside in summer and the south in winter. Conversely, the argument continued, "the farmer and his wife have struggled along and with farm life unattractive because of hard and unceasing labor the boys and girls of the farm have been drive to the cities to still

further add to the great congestion."[2]

This theme, the impoverishment of rural people by the "traducers" of wealth, sounds throughout Equity and NPL literature. In 1916, former Minnesota congressman James Manahan wrote simply that "For years the farmers and laboring men of the Northwest have been cheated in the market place, swindled by tax-dodgers and politicians, gouged by Shylock bankers and robbed without mercy by the monopolies."[3] In its newspaper, the Nonpartisan Leader, the Nonpartisan League declared that "Every year the farmer fattens up the wealth he has produced by long, hard work in the fields....[and] every year when he is 'ripe' he has been reaped....He comes out with tattered clothes and empty pockets, while the stream of golden grain has been poured into the pockets of Big Biz and carted off to build palaces and fortunes...."[4]

The issue was clear: the hardworking farmer was the basis of wealth, but was victimized by an unjust economic system that allowed others to appropriate what rightfully belonged to the farmer. This picture obviously appealed mightily to many rural people in the Upper Midwest. In 1919, Harmony, Minnesota, farmer Thomas Duxbury put the situation into verses titled "Facts About the Farmer":

> Who, since the time of Adam's fall,
> Has clothed the world and fed themselves?
> Who did the wood and water haul?
> The patient plodding farmer.
>
> Who, since time now far remote,
> Since ever history did make note,
> Has done the work and been the goat?
> The much maligned farmer.

Who freedom's flag to breeze unfurled?

Who defiance at all tyrants hurled?

Who fired the shot heard 'round the world?

The embattled American farmer.

Duxbury's stanzas credit the farmer with patriotism, forebearance, and unselfishness:

Who asks for nothing but his own,.

Yet asks in vain because alone?

Who asks for bread and gets a stone?

The unorganized fool farmer.

The solution to the dilemma thus posed was obviously organization, and Duxbury leaves little to the imagination:

Who was it pointed out the way

To better things, a bright new day?

Who put democ in democracy?

The organized League farmer.[5]

Offerings such as Duxbury's frankly invoked Jeffersonian ideals about the place of agriculture and the small farmer in the "natural order" and established a sense of common deprivation around which organizing could be accomplished. The message went beyond mere words; NPL political cartoons displayed the ideal graphically. A typical image has the farmer feeding the world[6]; another shows the farmer balancing a complicated economic structure on his back while a stout and masked figure labeled "middleman" perches on top and robs a third figure labeled "consumer."[7] The NPL cartoonist "Rillican" put it bluntly:

The earth should belong to all men

Equally and fairly divided.

But if all should till--then who would mill

That all could be provided.

So some must till and others mill

That each may have a share,

And they who neither till nor mill

But profit--best beware.[8]

The target for this agrarian rhetoric was variously described and depicted. Equity Society newspapers labeled the opposition simply: they were variously "the combine," "the interests," or "the parasites."[9] Such phrases left no doubt that in Equity's opinion the struggle pit those who were honest, open, and above-board against those who were nefarious, underhanded, and somehow dishonest. Co-operators Herald writer Thomas J. Jackson forecast ceaseless confrontation "between the producers and the parasites" until cooperators overcame speculators who gambled with the farmer's money; in his opinion, the latter were "injurious micro-organisms" whose success depended " on their ability to operate from dark, secret places."[10]

Others did not hesitate to name the enemy specifically. Equity members frequently attacked the Minneapolis Chamber of Commerce by name, depicting them as "sleek and slippery hirelings," and warning farmers to avoid dealings of any kind with them. When the Nonpartisan League appeared, its skilled propagandists gave shape, form, and voice to the opposition. Writer O. M. Thomason, using the pseudonym "N. P. Dictagraph," created Will B. Crafty, "head hoss for the political machine:"

[Crafty] sat behind a flat-top desk.... [He]
rolled a half chewed cigar from one side
of his steel-trap-like mouth to the other...

> His large, fat hand, covered over with bristly hair drummed idly on the corner of the desk. A black stubby mustache cover a firm upper and slightly drooped at the corners. A French flannel vest was was buttoned around a large stomache and a checked tie bulged under a double chin. The forehead was broad but flat, and the hair was closely cropped, while a pair of ratlike eyes looked through a pair of spectacles, perched on a Roman nose. The end of the nose was red. The eyes made you wince as if some one was trying to bore holes in you with a gimlet.[11]

Crafty, however, was clearly a hireling. According to NPL propagandists, above him was "Alex Big Biz" or some like-named character, all representative of the urban financier who "doeth the farmer right."[12] This character always wore diamonds and a top hat, was fat and overfed, and always dressed in the latest style. Characters more in harmony with Jefferson's proscriptions about the ultimate corruptions of urban life are difficult to imgine; rural people found the message unmistakeable.

In contrast, both Equity and League established a farmer symbol who personified a very positive rural image completely in concert with Jefferson's idealism. The character, named "Hi'am A. Rube," represented all that was good, clean, and upright. In appearance, this representation of the farmer looked decidedly like Uncle Sam; he was weathered by hard work in the open fields and somehow seemed timeless, a person whose values were dependable, respectable, earthy, and even perhaps pure and unfettered by avarice and greed. At various times, this image transmuted into the "Shade of Lincoln" plowing out corruption from the fields of government, or a Pilgrim Father

protecting democracy against all harm. In these images, the farmer became a father figure, a protector of all the fragile values of a democratic society.[13]

Graphic images made comparison easy. On the one hand stood the forces of corruption (e.g., evil) and on the other stood the forces of good (e.g., the American ideal). There could be little doubt which side was right.

The battle between these two images was cast in Jeffersonian language filled with heroic images. To challenge the "Bold Boast of the Tyrant," rural movements challenged rural people to recognize themselves as liberators. NPL president Arthur C. Townley called farmers "the guardians of liberty of the people of the the United States" and explained their mission as "to succor, to rescue [America] from this hell on earth where men starve in the midst of plenty." In this he echoed Equity Society declarations of allegience to the principles of "equal rights to all and special privileges to none." The rural movement propagandists depicted "Average Farmer[s]" meting out doses of "liberty tonic" to a diminished and decidedly devilish opposition; they portrayed the the farmer sounding a liberty bell labeled "the People's Rights." To this patriotic image were added allusions to heroes such as Paul Revere, shown riding through the countryside to call farmers to "win a glorious victory over the forces of autocracy."[14]

The language of battle permeated all rural movement literature. Prior to the 1916 North Dakota primary election, NPL papers asked farmers "Will YOU Do YOUR Part?" and drew the League farmer as a gladiator in heroic struggle with a fallen opponent labeled "Old Gang Politics" whose weapon bore the caption "boss rule." The Minnesota Leader published a song with the following verses:

Now the patriots true, are coming to the fight,

And the armies, too, are not weak and small,

So, God bless them while we sing that the farmer is the king,
For the farmer is the man who feeds them all.

From the rising to the setting of the sun,
Great monopolies are surely doomed to fall,
Then onward in the fight, and we'll battle for the right,
While the farmer is the man who feeds us all.[15]

For these farm organizations, the battle had evident and obvious goals. First and foremost was "right and justice," a phrase which calls to mind Jeffersonian assertions about the purity and goodness of rural people. A Jordan, Minnesota, woman wrote, to the tune of "Yankee Doodle," that

The League is growing mighty fast
To give us some real justice,
In county courts who've in the past
Tried everything to bust us.

And followed such verses with a chorus:

Come you farmers, join the League,
Come you working people;
Don't be ruled by the old clique,
For we are all born equal.[16]

Because farmers were "the foundation, the protectors, the guardians, the providers of the state," only they could be trusted to put "human rights before property rights," in the words of the Nonpartisan Leader. A 1916 NPL New Year's resolution put it bluntly:

Resolved, That the Farmer, the fundamental creator of the necessities of life, shall be looked upon by others in the light of his importance to his fellows and treated justly as such...

> that, by the Eternal, he shall stand erect as a man, shorn of the artificial and parasitical burdens put upon him, equal with his fellows, under peaceful government, to enjoy, in its fullness, the constitutional right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness...[17]

To this end, the NPL invoked the words of Abraham Lincoln, "With malice toward none, with charity for all." Protection of liberty and freedom, prosperity for producers and consumers, and an end to class hatred and suspicion, goals that Jefferson would have expected from a farmers' movement, were the reasons for battle.

These words and symbols proclaim the continuing power of Jeffersonian Democracy in early 20th Century agrarian movements in Minnesota and North Dakota. The effort to meld farmers into a powerful political weapon called upon many of the symbolic and philosophical images popularized a century earlier by the agrarian president, an aristocratic Virginia slaveholder. His elevation of the small landholding farmer, the yeoman, to the safekeeper and bastion of democracy became the centerpiece for a later generation's struggle. While those movements expanded his agrarianism to include urban workers under the umbrella of the "producing class," they did not change his intent to uphold the common people as the saviors of democracy. The resulting literature of agitation graphically separated the toilers from the traducers and established the basis for political struggle that came to involve thousands of people. Jefferson, we may assume, would have agreed with the results that both the Equity and the NPL sought--to make "things as they should be"--and provide rural people with the respect and honor of a grateful society.

Footnotes

1. The following synopsis of Jeffersonian Democracy is drawn from Saul K. Padover, editor, Thomas Jefferson on Democracy (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1939); Merrill D. Peterson, The Jefferson Image in the American Mind (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962). Also see the concise definition in Edward L. Schapsmeier and Frederick H. Schapsmeier, Encyclopedia of American Agricultural History (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1975), pp. 184-185. The best critique of Jeffersonian ideas as manifested in late 19th and early 20th Century farm movements is Richard Hofstadter, The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F. D. R. (New York: Vintage Books, 1955).
2. Fargo Co-operator's Herald, January 30, 1914, p. 1.
3. Fargo Nonpartisan Leader, June 1, 1916, p. 5.
4. Ibid., June 15, 1916, p. 5.
5. St. Paul Minnesota Leader, December 6, 1919, p. 4.
6. Nonpartisan Leader, April 26, 1917.
7. Ibid., May 17, 1917, p. 3.
8. Minnesota Leader, June 28, 1919, p. 4.
9. Co-operator's Herald, July 17, 1914, p. 1; September 16, 1914, p. 1.
10. Ibid., December 19, 1913, p. 1.
11. Nonpartisan Leader, January 20, 1916, p. 2.
12. [redacted] Nonpartisan Leader, October 21, 1915, p. 1
13. Ibid., May 18, 1916, p. 15; November 30, 1916, p. 1.
14. ibid., October 12, 1916, p. 4; April 12, 1917, p. 9; Co-operator's Herald, March 6, 1914, p. 2; Nonpartisan Leader, August 17, 1916, p. 9; November 2, 1916, p. 1.
15. Nonpartisan Leader, June 1, 1916, p. 1; June 29, 1916, p. 1; Minnesota

Leader, June 29, 1918, p. 4.

16. Minnesota Leader, September 13, 1919, p. 4.

17. Nonpartisan Leader, June 1, 1916, p. 1; November 2, 1916, pp. 16-17; January 6, 1916, p. 6.